

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 151

CE 015 627

AUTHOR Bruening, William N.
TITLE Career Education and the Liberal Arts: Are They Incompatible?
PUB DATE [70]
NOTE 10p.; Not available in hard copy due to faint print
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Education; College Curriculum; Curriculum Development; Curriculum Evaluation; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Philosophy; *General Education; Liberal Arts; Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

The general question of what an undergraduate education is and how it should be related, if at all, to society as a whole, is discussed. Particular reference is given to the issue of liberal education and its relationship with career education. The thesis is that, although career education and liberal education may be incompatible in a specific curriculum at a specific university, there is no logical necessity nor educational necessity that every curriculum at every university make career education incompatible with liberal education. (Author/TA)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

William H. Gruening

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

CAREER EDUCATION AND THE LIBERAL ARTS:

ARE THEY INCOMPATIBLE?

Robert Paul Wolff argues in his The Ideal of the University that a non-viable model of a university is one in which the university is a training camp for the professions. He further argues that a university should not be a social service station. One of his reasons for rejecting the training-camp-for-the-professions model is that such a view "damages and eventually destroys the unity of the academic community."¹ Wolff rejects the social-service-station model because such a model fails to distinguish sharply between "effective or market demand and human or social need."² Although this paper is not devoted to the specific issues that Wolff raises nor his positions on those issues, it is devoted to the general question that is presupposed by Wolff's discussion--what is an undergraduate education and how should it be related, if at all, to the society as a whole. Particular reference will be given to the issue of liberal education and its relationship with career education. The thesis is that, although career education and liberal education may be incompatible in a specific curriculum at a specific university, there is no logical necessity nor educational necessity that every curriculum at every university makes career education incompatible with liberal education.

Let us begin with a few definitions. "Career education" can be defined as that education which has as its curricular purpose the training of students for occupations after the completion of the prescribed curriculum. The occupations can be extremely various, e.g., the

ED154151

1
CE 015 627

traditional vocational education geared toward technical careers or pre-law, pre-med, and so on where the undergraduate education does not lead immediately to seeking, and hopefully finding, an occupation, but where the undergraduate education is a necessary condition for admittance to graduate or professional school. The curriculum in such career education programs may also vary from a great deal of specificity (perhaps defined by the lack of free electives in the program) to a significantly less specified curriculum (again perhaps defined by the relatively greater number of free electives). Career education is thus intrinsically connected with the possibility of finding suitable employment either at the end of the undergraduate program or at the end of the graduate or professional training. If the notion of accountability is a criterion for evaluating such career education, then the success of the program can be at least partially determined by the number of students who find suitable employment upon completion of the program and/or by the number of students who are accepted into graduate or professional school. A more indirect measure of success would be the number of students who find suitable employment after the completion of the graduate or professional program. The indirectness results from the input of the graduate or professional training into the "employability" of the student. The crucial factor in career education is that there is an extrinsic criterion for measuring its success--this does not necessarily mean that there are no intrinsic criteria.

A liberal education, by contrast, stresses the intrinsic value of the curriculum and has traditionally stressed a less specialized set of

courses for completion of the program. Historically, this program has included the trivium and the quadrivium but most liberal education colleges today have a different understanding of the liberal education curriculum. At the risk of oversimplifying, the liberal education curriculum today contains doses of all or almost all of the following: literature, science, mathematics, history, psychology, sociology, philosophy, language, and so on. Normally, such curricula have minimal specific requirements and allow great freedom in the choice and number of free electives. It should be pointed out that this is also true in some career education oriented curricula. The crucial notion that separates liberal education from career education is the relative importance each places on the extrinsic criteria used to evaluate the curriculum. A liberal education curriculum claims that, even if there are extrinsic criteria which can be used to evaluate the success of the liberal arts curriculum, the crucial criteria used to evaluate a liberal arts curriculum are intrinsic to the program itself. Thus, even if a liberal education graduate had little or no "employability," the liberal arts curriculum would still be valuable because its accountability is not measured in terms of an extrinsic criterion such as "employability." It should be pointed out that such an external criterion is not incompatible with liberal arts education, but is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the evaluation of a liberal education curriculum. "Employability" is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for a career education curriculum.

As we have defined the terms "liberal education" and "career education" it seems quite obvious that, even if the two models of education are not necessarily incompatible, they are certainly not identical. Yet it is not uncommon to find a university that offers both kinds of curricula and, especially in smaller colleges, at times granting an identical type of degree to the history major and the marketing major. In fact, some colleges require that professional programs or pre-professional programs have the same general education requirements that liberal education programs have. Thus, it often occurs that a marketing major is required to take some courses in history, science, literature, and so on; less frequently does it happen that the literature major is required to take courses in marketing.

If we were to be satisfied with the definitions given above, we could easily understand at least part of the present controversy concerning career education versus liberal education. The fundamental issue that is buried just beneath the surface of this controversy is really the question of the nature of undergraduate education. Specifically, the controversy involves questions about the instrumental value of an undergraduate education both in terms of the usefulness of the program to obtain employment and/or admission into a graduate or professional school and in terms of the usefulness of the program in light of social and human needs. Those who argue for the liberal education curriculum contend that extrinsic criteria are irrelevant or at most of secondary importance in discussing the nature of undergraduate education. Those who

favor career education contend that external criteria are not only relevant but the most important criteria in evaluating undergraduate curricula.

Paraphrasing the debate one might claim that the liberal education devotees argue "What good is it to have a job when you can't think and be happy?" The career education devotees argue "What good is it to be able to think and be happy if you don't have a job and thus don't eat?"

This debate is wrongheaded. It makes certain assumptions that are at least questionable, if not downright false. Both parties to the debate assume that being able to think and being happy are antithetical or at least not congruent with working. Even more deeply the two parties to the debate both assume that liberal education is not useful and that career education is not liberal--i.e., freeing or emancipating. This assumption that both parties to the debate agree on is never argued for. I do not think that there are any conclusive arguments that would substantiate this assumption. Not only are there no conclusive arguments in favor of this assumption, there are positive and conclusive arguments in favor of the very negation of the assumption. In fact, liberal education is useful and career education is emancipating--or at least this is the way it ought to be.

The key to understanding the relationship between liberal education and career education is Whitehead's notion of "inert ideas."³ The original and perhaps only sin of any education program or institution is that it focuses on inert ideas, knowledge that is not immediately useful.

As Whitehead claims, "Knowledge does not keep any better than fish."⁴

Whitehead defines inert ideas as "ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilised, or tested, or thrown into fresh combination."⁵ Of course, Whitehead's views are relevant not only to the curriculum in a college but also the curriculum in primary and secondary school. Not only is Whitehead advocating the elimination of inert ideas in the curriculum; he is also advocating the elimination of distinct subject matters or disciplines in schools. He says:

The solution that I am urging, is to eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum. There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations. Instead of this single unity, we offer children--Algebra, from which nothing follows; Geometry, from which nothing follows; Science, from which nothing follows; History, from which nothing follows; a Couple of Languages, never mastered; and lastly, most dreary of all, Literature, represented by the plays of Shakespeare, with philological notes and short analyses of plot and character to be in substance committed to memory. Can such a list be said to represent Life, as it is known in the midst of the living of it? The best that can be said of it is, that it is a rapid table of contents which a deity might run over in his mind while he was thinking of creating a world, and had not yet determined how to put it together.⁶

So much for the traditional liberal education curriculum. Unfortunately, the career education curriculum is not any better geared toward Life (in Whitehead's sense) than the liberal education curriculum. Both curricula tend to postpone life by either saying that what happens after a degree is granted is irrelevant to what goes on in college or by saying that the value of the education can only be determined by what happens after the degree is granted. Either way, college becomes a

place where one does not live--one is either removed from life (thus perhaps the ivory tower conception of a college) or one is always postponing living by preparing for something beyond college. What is needed is a more pragmatic notion of education following the ideas of Whitehead or Dewey.

The reason why the controversy over liberal education vs. career education arises is that both parties' notion of education is one-sided. Neither sees the whole; neither has a vision of the whole. The reason why the two parties to the dispute disagree so much is because they agree on a basic assumption--education must be partial, fragmented, and one-sided. What Whitehead is proposing and defending is a revision of the curriculum not so much in the specifics of the subjects taught but a revision in terms of the overall purpose for teaching any of the subjects. What he is arguing for is a more viable philosophy of education --a philosophy of education that is sensitive to the growth and development not only of minds but of persons, a philosophy of education that sees a pragmatic connection between theory and practice (yet a philosophy that does not confuse theory with practice). The faulty philosophy of education that is the basis for the controversy between devotees of liberal education and devotees of career education needs to be changed if the controversy is to be solved (or dissolved).

In summary, there is no logical necessity that career education be incompatible with liberal education. There is surely no educational necessity for the incompatibility if one uses Whitehead's view as a

model for education. Robert Paul Wolff might object here because his pro-Marxist views incline him to retort that Whitehead's notion might well be used by the Establishment to create more Establishment men. This, of course, might be true; but there is no necessity that it be so used. It may be true that an educational system cannot be divorced from an economic and political system, at least in practice. But in theory one can divorce them at least for the sake of discussion. And it should not be assumed that what Whitehead argues for cannot fit quite nicely in a non-exploitive and non-alienating economic system. In fact, Whitehead's model of education is quite compatible with such a system.

NOTES

¹Robert Paul Wolff, The Ideal of the University (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 12.

²Ibid., p. 36.

³Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 1.

⁴Ibid., p. 98.

⁵Ibid., p. 1

⁶Ibid., p. 6-7.